

AN ETPG WHITE PAPER

WHO CAN AND SHOULD USE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENTS IN EUROPE

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Test authors, publishers and assessment users all have a role in ensuring responsible use. The goal of this paper is to explain how restricting test supplies to qualified users informs this objective, and to underline the importance the European Test Publishers Group (ETPG) and its members attach to a carefully controlled test supply.

*This paper addresses the **general** principles underlying this restriction of test supply internationally. The interpretation of these principles to create particular purchase guidelines and supply arrangements is affected by the legal, professional, psychological, and social environment in different countries. References are provided for those detailed national guidelines at the end of this document.*

THE VARIETY OF TESTS AND WHO USES THEM

Psychological assessments come in different shapes and sizes. They cover topics ranging from anxiety, sleeping disorder, and ADHD, to intelligence, personality, and creativity. This variety is mirrored in their many different formats: questionnaires, structured interviews, observation scales, performance tests and even serious games. Tests can be delivered in digital and printed forms and administered in clinics, offices, and schools, or in someone's home.

As we have mentioned above, supply arrangements vary between countries, though most of them draw on the work of European bodies such as the European Federation of Psychological Associations (EFPA). In some, countries test sales are strictly limited to psychologically-trained administrators. In others, and for certain applications, who can purchase and use tests is varied: recognised users can be psychologists with different specialisms, child and adult psychiatrists, general practitioners, job coaches, speech and other therapists, remedial teachers and other professionals. In certain countries, individuals can buy tests whatever their profession if they have taken either general or test-specific training delivered by a publisher and approved by a psychological association. And the internet has made it easier for people with no relevant professional qualifications and no specific training to access tests, threatening their accurate and informed use.

Nevertheless, most national, and international scientific or professional organizations stress the need to control test supply and purchase in some way.

ETPG'S GUIDELINES

Responsible test supply requires that only test users with the relevant level of knowledge, skill and experience can purchase and use a specific test. Both test users and test suppliers have responsibilities in this process.

1. Each test has an outcome which is important to the test taker.

2. Decisions resulting from test results can affect people's lives.
3. Test use without appropriate knowledge or qualification can lead to mistaken interpretation and damaging decisions.
4. Harmful decisions, based on inappropriate test use, can lead to expensive, time-consuming, and damaging legal cases.
5. Attractively designed online tests can, at times, give a false impression of scientific rigour leading to inappropriate usage.
6. Reliable and valid psychological tests are based on science. Test users need some understanding of that science to use them appropriately.
7. Tests are based on statistical calculations: test scores need to be evaluated in the individual's context and integrated with other information sources (e.g., interviews, individual histories, other assessments, etc.).

HIGH AND LOW STAKE OUTCOMES

Some assessments published by ETPG members are designed to provide direction for more detailed examination, such as very early screening tests designed to help plan further investigation. By their nature their effects are longer term and have no immediate affect on an individual's life. However, the outcomes of most tests can have a shorter-term, significant, and sometimes irreversible, impact on the person involved. Examples include clinical diagnoses and treatment planning; evaluations of educational strengths and challenges; assessments of job fit or suitability; estimates of the risk in releasing an offender into the community. Assessment results can be used to generate discussions in coaching, counselling, and hiring, and these often lead to either the person or the test administrator taking action.

It is essential to define who can use these psychological tests with high-stakes outcomes.

ADMINISTRATION, SCORING AND INTERPRETATION

To address this last issue competently we first have to decide what is meant by using a test. Does this mean administering it, calculating the scores, or interpreting the outcomes? And is this the same for digital and pencil-and-paper tests?

Administration: Some psychological tests are difficult to use and need professional supervision in a specific environment; others can be administered without supervision – for instance certain online tests. For difficult-to-administer assessments, practice helps the user gain the experience needed with the test and its item format and is strongly recommended by publishers or is mandatory. This is true for both paper and digital tests, even though administration of digital tests is often unsupervised and may take place away from standardized environments.

Scoring: The same goes for calculating scores. Modern digital tests are scored using software programs, but printed tests may require training to avoid errors.

Interpretation: Interpreting outcomes, or turning the data from the assessment into actionable information, is the most important part of any testing process. Modern digital tests often use algorithms to create printed reports on test takers' results. The psychological assessment user needs to understand the basis for these reports: who created the rule base, how the report text is derived, the complexity of the programming, and the robustness of the information provided. In other cases, particularly when paper/pencil tests are used, a qualified and trained professional needs to attach meaning to the numbers, so the test results can substantiate a decision. Poor or hasty interpretation

of test results can often have severe consequences – so using a test properly means, first of all, interpreting a test correctly.

WHO ARE QUALIFIED USERS?

So, who should use psychological tests? Whatever the field of use, there are five fundamental areas which contribute to responsible, professional test use.

1. **Knowledge of aspects of test construction:** A test user needs to understand the key stages and processes in test construction, including what makes a test appropriate for a specific purpose; what constitutes good reliability and validity; and the limitations of psychological assessments. Test users do not need the detailed extensive knowledge that a test developer has, but they do need to know enough to evaluate how the appropriateness of an assessment for what they want to test, and whether it reaches minimum technical standards. This kind of knowledge is acquired in diverse ways in different countries, for instance with a degree in psychology or psychiatry, but also with certain other kinds of higher education. In some cases, training taken in professional contexts, provided by a professional association or a supplier, is recognized as being sufficient for understanding important areas of test construction.
2. **Knowledge of the test topic:** A test user needs to have sufficient knowledge of the topic area being assessed, for example depression, ADHD, intelligence, personality, etc. Again, a relevant education is required, but in most cases actual real-world knowledge of the topic is best acquired through working experience.
3. **A basic knowledge of psychometrics:** A test user with low expertise or poor to little knowledge of psychometrics can tend to interpret test scores as though the test was a physical measurement tool, like a thermometer (or, worse, like a quiz). Taking a test score as an absolute truth can lead to serious mistakes in assessing the test taker, both in clinical and occupational settings. This can be especially true when scores are borderline, as the interpretation also needs to consider the meaning of the scores immediately over or below the actual test point. As statistically- and probabilistically-based measure tools, it is critical when interpreting test results to have a clear understanding of the meaning of standard deviation, confidence interval, and other psychometric elements.
4. **Experience in the specific field:** A test user needs to understand the field of use involved as it influences how the test outcome is interpreted. For instance, an intelligence test might be used to assess special education needs, or the suitability of a program for gifted children, or the chance of promotion to a high-level job. Knowledge of the test itself and of its specific topic is not enough: the user must also understand the significance of the meaning of the test outcomes in that particular field, which requires a relevant level of knowledge and experience.
5. **Commitment to scientific and professional standards:** A responsible test user needs to understand that because of the potential impact of assessment results on test takers, they are under a moral obligation to meet the standards for psychological assessment established in their country.

TEST USERS' AND PUBLISHERS' RESPONSIBILITIES

We have argued that psychological assessments should only be used by those with relevant knowledge and experience, however this is acquired.

Test users: have a responsibility to only purchase or use tests for which they have knowledge and/or experience. Certain test-using professions require proof of continuing professional

development, but all test users will find ongoing training, reading and development will benefit their own careers as well as their clients' futures.

Publishers: also have responsibilities. Test manuals as well as marketing messages, training programmes and other sorts of communication should be clear about the requirements for use. As a condition for joining ETPG, members observe the qualification guidelines that are in force in the countries where they operate, in order to protect test takers, test users and everyone involved in the testing process from the harmful consequences of the untrained use of tests.

Publishers use different methods for checking the qualification of purchasers in different countries, but ultimately it is the responsibility of professional test users to be clear about their abilities and only use tests they are competent to administer and interpret accurately. Most customers will not mind a request for an assumption of responsibility by test. A self-declaration of having the necessary qualifications or competencies may be required from customers ordering a test for the first time.

ABOUT THE ETPG

The European Test Publishers Group (ETPG) is a group of psychological test publishers, all based in Europe. It was formed in 1991 to: *'help create an intellectual and commercial environment which values scientific measurement in psychological testing. It supports its members and works with test customers, users, developers, researchers, academics, and policy makers to achieve this.'*

ETPG's annual conference focuses on new developments in psychological testing, looking at ways our industry can meet changing needs. Our white papers on key testing topics contribute to scientific and professional conferences as well as relevant policy proposals. We welcome discussions on ideas will improve testing's impact on European society.

ETPG works with other associations (the European Federation of Psychological Associations [EFPA], the International Test Commission [ITC], the Association of Test Publishers [ATP] among others) to continually improve testing practices. Its annual conference is a major forum to discuss new test developments and the needs of European test users. ETPG gathers together individuals and companies with huge experience and knowledge in all aspects of psychological testing.

The ETPG's mission is to improve European Testing by:

- raising standards in test design and use;
- progressing creative developments in testing;
- promoting professional use of tests internationally;
- developing fair systems of copyright protection to the benefit of all parties;
- increasing and promoting the benefits of applied psychology to European citizens;
- developing links with test industries outside Europe to raise overall standards.

The group's values focus on:

- Innovating
- Social Engagement
- Being evidence-based
- Using scientific methods to develop products and services.
- Being open and transparent
- Adhering to professional standards